

Aida Tomescu

By Terence Maloon, 2006

From across the room, paintings in Aida Tomescu's 2003 exhibition at Niagara Galleries resembled rockfaces, rough, craggy and immemorial. They seemed to speak the language of the earth – stains and seepage; weathered, wind-blasted surfaces; sandy deposits built up on flood-plains; layers of soil impacted, weighed-down, subject to friction, heating and cooling. They suggested aggregates of matter sliding over each other and chafing, altering from solid to molten states; becoming massively heavy and dense; growing brittle and friable; worn smooth and glistening – ever changing across their exposed outer face, evanescent and timeless at once.

With each new sequence of work, Aida Tomescu seems to advance or to jog the metaphors previously established in her paintings. For example, there was a phase that lasted between the late 1980s and early 1990s when darkness descended and squalls of turbulence and downpours of thin paint lashed her canvases – so much so that the intimations of light, colour, space and pictorial form struggled to survive in such a gloomy, punishing climate. But survive they did, and, strange to say, it was these paintings that established Tomescu's reputation in Sydney. Such uncompromising works could be held as proof of an artist's honesty and courage – as indeed they were. Even if you didn't like them or mistrusted something about them, the fact remained that, if you gave them time, you had to take them to heart; they stayed with you.

"The destructive element is too much neglected in art," Mondrian famously said. Apropos, Tomescu explains that her paintings of the late 1980s and early '90s were conceived "against the idea of painting as a commodity" – a revealing admission. Although it may no longer be so obvious, negation, erasure and obliteration continue to play an important part in her work. Her paintings are almost always the result of repeated painting-over, scraping out and eliminating whatever is unwanted and unnecessary. The right of every ingredient to survive and prevail is relentlessly questioned and tested. For Tomescu, as for Matisse, painting out and scraping off involve the workings of a ferocious critical intelligence. The image that survives is an outcome of repeated demolitions and countless modifications. However, if all goes well, the painting benefits tremendously from all this investment of psychic energy.

In fact, the sense of *mass* conveyed by Tomescu's paintings is not merely due to the accumulation of material on the surface: it is an abstraction of the mental and physical energy that has gone into the painting's construction. In her drawings and collages too, energy becomes a function of mass, as is implied by Einstein's formula of $E=mc^2$. This is superbly exemplified by the *Phosphor* drawings, where a congeries of lines ravel and unravel, creating localised densities and also lending depth, substance and visual weight to the sheet of paper as a whole.

In 2002, in an exhibition in the Martin Browne gallery in Sydney, the churned-up, grungy textures, the lashings of dribbles and the peripheral fizz of spatters that had come to characterise Tomescu's style suddenly disappeared. There was a group of paintings whose colour was clear and radiant – seraphic yellows, pale blues and silver greys, with the surfaces all smoothed-out and becalmed. Whether these paintings were large or small, they made me think of vast sea-surfaces and a brilliant light which, to my mind, evoked the Aegean. The mood was serene and beatific. Nonetheless, the

emotional/associative register of Tomescu's paintings can alter as soon it comes within the bounds of definition. A wistful-seeming reserve and sense of measure characterised most of the paintings in her following exhibitions, featuring beautiful variations of opaque blues and recondite variations of grey, the grittiness returning in increments.

In fact, Aida Tomescu's recent exhibitions have all been carefully thought-out ensembles, where a certain number of paintings defines the character of the show as a whole, while others act as foils, harmonies and attenuations of the tonality and overall mood. In the current exhibition, earth and fire are the keynotes, established by a group of large paintings made between 2005 and early 2006. Their red, yellow and tawny colours dominate the other works, and an exhilarating complement of collages and drawings reinforces their sense of wildness and heat.

The groups of works in this exhibition all imply a set of norms, a set of conventions that governs each of them respectively. This gives a general impression of orderliness and consistency to the exhibition, but it also allows for some bold deviations: three small paintings called *Petit matin* reprise the coolness, spaciousness and Morandi-like radiance of Tomescu's works of the recent past. Even more striking is the clashing character of *Windhover*, a painting that signals something special, jolting the metaphors that govern the neighbouring works and, so to speak, whistling in a new game.

As we have noted, Tomescu is a past master of evocative colour, not least of evocative blues, but *Windhover* surprises because, in marked contrast to the neighbouring works, it consists almost entirely of a primary colour (cobalt blue mixed with varying amounts of white) which looks un-transfigured, non-allusive, almost brashly artificial. The viewer is not prompted to think of light and space or sky and water – not to mention earth and fire. Long tongues of palette-knifed impasto seem to create a shallow bas-relief, yet it is the drawing that captures our attention: how the paint strokes stretch this way and that, how they break apart in fronds and flutters and merge together with a soft, insistent beat. There are small, niggling patches near the edges of the canvas that are not covered by blue, where you glimpse bits of the primed canvas and remnants of the earlier history of the painting. These patches (like everything else) are perfectly placed, perfectly weighted, and chime in perfectly with the cadences of the impasto, but they serve to negate the painting's effect of monolithic totality. Gnawing away at the edges, they undermine the solidity of the field, with the result that the great expanse of blue suddenly transforms into a cropped-out silhouette, thrust forward into relief.

The title *Windhover* was suggested by a friend of Tomescu's, in reference to a well known poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889); it suggests an intriguing connection between painting and poetry. In his early life Hopkins had wanted to be a painter, but exactly what kind of painter could he have become in Victorian England? Is there anything in nineteenth-century painting which approaches his poetic effects?:

The Windhover

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-drawn Falcon, in his
riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High here, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy ! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend : the hurl and
gliding
Rebuffed the big wind.ⁱ

Hopkins' verse is all vertiginous sensation, a rush of imagery, dense aural patterns, athletic sentence-building. Language attains an extraordinary plasticity: "Stress is the life of it", he wrote in a letter to Robert Bridges.ⁱⁱ This is not a million miles away from what Tomescu does.

Do the mood-swings in Aida Tomescu's exhibitions correspond to changes in her personal life? Not at all, according to her explanation: changes in her work usually occur without forethought and with little or no conscious intervention. They just follow the logic or illogic of one thing coming after another. The causes can be as banal as opening a new tin of cadmium red, or deciding: "enough of that for the time being". Change is the artist's way of challenging herself and of staying interested in what she does. We recognise not only a steady growth in Tomescu's powers as a painter, but also the remarkable quality of her achievements in other media. A range of quite disparate skills has been developed in parallel to her painting, in her drawings, collages and etchings. The collages dramatize discontinuity and fragmentation whereas the paintings emphasize continuity and wholeness; the drawings are livewire improvisations, while the paintings are slow and deliberate. These preoccupations thrive in opposition to each other, but they imply each other, motivate each other and occasionally rub off on each other.

Working more or less full time in her studio, it takes Tomescu about eighteen months to produce enough work for an exhibition. The gestation of her paintings is very slow. I admire all the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of her effort, which I attribute to the difficulty of authentic expression, of making art that really matters. Received opinion says that authentic works of art have to struggle to find a place in an inimical world, and this seems as true today as ever. Ours is not a particularly auspicious or healthy world for a painter: on the one hand, there are any number of pundits who are eager to tell you they've seen it all before, that your work is anachronistic, that western/modern/abstract/abstract-expressionist painting has had its day, and have you thought of getting a day job? – and, on the other hand, there is the embarrassing responsibility of acknowledging the glut of bad painting, the witless confidence of the art market and the dubious merits of painters in the star-system.

Painters have to struggle against pervasive mainstream values that can hinder and even block an intelligent appreciation of what they do. Consider what it means to be a painter in a time when fewer and fewer things in our culture are hand-made. Consider the value we accord to speed and efficiency of communication. Consider the

implications of the ideal of *glasnost* (transparency). Consider the importance of the screen in all its manifestations and associated concepts. These phenomena are not just antithetical to painting, they can confuse and degrade the basic principles and conditions necessary for painting to subsist as an art. So it is perfectly understandable why there are many detractors who think that painting is obsolete, and, alternatively, why there are many artists (and not just painters) who cheerfully declare their solidarity with the stone age.

ⁱ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Windhover", in W.H.Gardner (ed.): *Gerard Manley Hopkins, A Selection of His Poems and Prose*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964, p. 30

ⁱⁱ Gerard Manley Hopkins, Letter to Robert Bridges, 13 May 1878, *ibid.*, p. 180.